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COLLEGE PREPARATION IN CHARACTER¹

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Your first feeling upon hearing the announcement of my subject may well have been one of indignant surprise. You are here to discuss the great questions of preparation for life, of the training of mind and heart for service to God and man. And now you are asked to look upon training in character as a part of preparation for college! It seems like the substitution of the narrow and temporary purpose for the great and real one. And your first impulse is to reply: "Preparation in character—that is preparation for the kingdom of heaven. It is bad enough that college men treat the work of the schools in language and history and science as though its main aim were to get boys ready for college; now to bring the training in character down to the same small end is a piece of college conceit." And yet, as you think again of what is involved in this subject, and of its relation to the work of the school as a whole, I think you will be willing to give to it a place in your discussions.

While only a small numerical part of the product of the schools goes on into college, it is a choice and influential part. It is made up largely of the young people whose influence in the schools is greatest, and whose influence in after-life is to shape government and business and society. No part of the training of these young people is so vital to the welfare of society as their training in character, and that training is the joint product of home, church, school, and college. That these agencies understand one another and work in harmony is of the utmost importance. Moreover, the moral standards of the college are of vital interest to the schools because of the strong reaction of college standards upon school standards. This influence is steadily increasing; the larger schools are in very close touch with the colleges. Partly through the press and partly through the increasing attention of the

¹ An address given at the Conference of Elementary and Secondary Schools with Dartmouth College, May 12, 1905.

college athletes to the boys in the schools, the customs and standards of the schools are profoundly affected by those of the colleges. A strong sentiment in the colleges, whether good or bad, is quickly and certainly reflected in the sentiment of the schools. The moral standards of the colleges are therefore matter of deep concern to the teachers in the schools.

To those who are responsible for the life in the colleges the question of preparation in character is of first importance. Most failures in college are failures in character. An alarmingly large fraction of every college class falls out by the way; aside from those who are forced to leave by family reverses or financial pressure, most men who drop out of their class drop for reasons that go back to moral causes. Most failures in scholarship are failures in the will to study. Men seldom enter college with intellectual preparation so defective that they cannot overcome their handicap by a strong, resolute determination to do their daily work. And every college has in it a certain set of men who, having entered with decent preparation, are steadily going under from sheer lack of moral purpose. The moral character of the entering classes is the most important factor for the college, for on that depend both the scholarship and character of the college itself.

But to understand the training in character that will best serve the common need of school and college, we must at the outset understand that, while school and college have the same moral end, they must work toward that end by very different means. The fundamental principle of the school is, and must be, training in character through obedience to just authority. The fundamental principle of the college must always be training in character through personal freedom. The one principle is for children, the other, for men. It is true that the secondary school is not to treat its pupils altogether as children, nor is the college to treat its students altogether as men; but the exceptions on either side are confined to a narrow range, chiefly along the line of years that are common to the last of school and the first of college life. School and college guide the individual through a long development that begins with the unquestioning obedience of the little child, and ends with the mature freedom of the man—a freedom that finds its complete exercise in the glad and

spontaneous obedience to the great laws of God, and their expression in social obligation.

It is essential that those who have to do with college preparation understand fully that their pupils are to come in their college life under this principle of moral freedom. The college exists for the very purpose of enabling a young man to come into his inheritance of free choice in the intellectual and the social and the moral world. He must make his own choices, and suffer the natural penalties of his own mistakes. He is to control his own time, his personal habits, his surroundings; only so far as his abuse of this freedom becomes a nuisance to others in the college community is it to be checked by authority. He has in his eighteen or nineteen years been long enough under dictation by the choices of others; it is time for him now to learn to choose for himself. Now, to many men this change from the constant supervision of home and school to the large freedom of college life comes with such abruptness, with such opportunity for mistake, with such temptation to wrong choice, that the whole experiment is a failure; to all men it serves as a great moral challenge.

Look more particularly at some of the moral dangers of college life. The first danger comes through immaturity. As President Hadley has recently said: "College students must be old enough to be left free to make their own mistakes." Some boys who enter college are too immature for the college principle of freedom; college is no place for such boys; if more time is what they need, let them have it before sending them into the freedom of college life; if it is a matter of maturity of thought, rather than of years, take means to develop that; anything is better than to send a boy who is not fit to choose into a community whose fundamental principle is freedom of choice.

The danger of gross physical immorality, while unfortunately not absent from any of our colleges, is not one of the chief moral dangers. Immoral men there are, willing slaves of drink and lust; but those men are few, and they are not representative men. They have as thoroughgoing contempt from their fellow-students as such men have in any community. I doubt if in any body of young men in business or the trades those who are addicted to physical vices are so few in number, or so far discredited by the sentiment of their com-

panions, as in any one of our representative colleges. When you read accounts of the immoralities of college men, remember that the few exceptions are spread abroad as interesting reading, while the self-respecting decency of the great body of college students is so much a matter of course that it is never mentioned. Do not believe any college man when he tells you that there is no gross immorality in his college; but be assured that the immorality that is certainly there is as odious to the college men as to any other community.

But what are the great moral dangers of our college communities? I have no hesitation in saying that the greatest danger is that of the ruinous habit of sheer loafing. Of all forms of preparation for practical life I do not see how a worse form could be invented than a course of four years in loafing. And yet this is precisely what the course amounts to for a considerable number of men in every college. For such a course the modern college offers abundant opportunities. The student finds himself in the midst of delightful surroundings, free to choose his own companions, largely in control of his own time, subject to trivial but absorbing social connections, and with the serious responsibilities of life held for a time in abeyance. The daily tasks of the college requirements are in many institutions practically superseded by brief periods of intense cramming twice in the year, with the certainty of the expert aid of a large staff of experienced coaches, whose wretched profession it is to secure for idle men the credit that belongs to industrious ones. In the institutions that still attempt to secure something more than the daily bodily presence of students in their classrooms the work is seldom more than a man of fair ability and training can do with comparative ease, while the universal elective system enables the idle man to pursue a continuous, if rather sinuous, course of comfort. And this idle college life is the more seductive because it is apparently so harmless; the round of games and friendly evenings by the open fire, and jolly fellowship in the fraternity hall, are all so clean and delightful that a student hardly out of boyhood may easily look upon them as the essential part of college life. Important they are, and no small part of the permanent value of a college course lies in just these things; but it is when these things are the accompaniments and the outgrowth of a vigorous and growing intellectual activity. They are essential parts of the full ripening

process of manhood; but there is a point where ripening passes over into decay, and that point lies just where the incidental occupations of a college life begin to take the place of its serious and central ones. This moral danger in our colleges is increasing with the increase in the proportion of men who have never known the necessity for personal sacrifice or labor for their own support.

Some of the remedies for this idleness of college life should, I believe, be applied by the colleges themselves. A man will not find in his later life any such indulgence of his weakness of purpose, his neglect of his work, his self-indulgence. Life has its own penalties for these sins, and they follow sure and fast. The colleges may well consider whether the freedom that they are giving to the college student is not in some degree an artificial freedom, inconsistent with the wise compulsions of nature. And yet a large degree of freedom must be left: freedom for an abundant social and physical life, for the development of individual taste, for the unconscious maturing of the mind. And so the outcome of it all is that the real remedy for the college vice of idleness must be found, not chiefly in repression of its freedom, but in the opening of the college life to no man who is not morally fit to use it well.

A second great danger of our college life is the danger of the lowering of ideals. In common thought it is probably assumed that there is no place where intellectual ideals are so exalted, and where they so impress young men, as in college. But those who know college life intimately are aware that there are certain currents of influence that are setting strongly away from the intellectual life. The greatest of these is the excessive attention to athletics, fostered by the daily press, thoughtlessly encouraged by a great body of college alumni, and every year absorbing more and more of the interest of the student body as a whole. This movement makes physical powers and endurance the highest elements of manhood; its honors are the coveted honors of the colleges; its representatives are the first to be chosen to the fraternities, and the most influential in the life of the student body. Often—not always—they are men who are worthy of the highest admiration for moral and social qualities; seldom are they men of distinguished intellectual achievement or ability. And yet in the common thought of the college these are the

men who give to it its real victories, who bring to it its highest honors, and to whom it owes the greatest debt. No achievement of the quiet, scholarly man can so appeal to the popular interest, or to the student imagination. The result of all this is an attitude of tolerance toward scholarship, not of real honor for it. And the tendency of the more active and vigorous men is to leave eminence in scholarship to the men of a less sturdy type.

Other interests also beside the athletic tend to divert the student from the intellectual ambitions with which he came to college. The young student likes to shine, to have his name known, to see it in the papers, and to see against it in the college annual something more than the date and place of his birth and the name of his fitting-school. He may, indeed, attain this distinction through high scholarship, but the road is a long one and a hard one; why not seek his distinction through some easier and more attractive course? If he is on the mandolin club, he will be fêted by the alumni on his winter rounds of the cities; the dramatic club will give him prominence in college and out of it; even the minstrel show will give him delightful trips from town to town, and a name elevated above that of the common herd. It needs no argument to prove that under influences like these the college student is in very real danger of losing both his interest and ambition in intellectual pursuits, and coming to look upon the intellectual part of college life as a troublesome burden, a hindrance to the pursuits in which he is really interested.

There was never a time when the scholarship of our colleges was so high as it is today; every college has its group of strong, earnest, brilliant scholars; but the evil of the situation is that they are becoming less and less the representative men of the colleges, and they are less and less identified with the other interests of college life. The ideal college would combine the athletic, the social, and the intellectual pursuits in the life of every student; the actual college is tending to rest content with a group of unintellectual athletes on one side, and of flabby scholars on the other. The Rhodes bequest has thrown a challenge among our college men; the challenge to produce our four-square man, scholar and athlete and social leader and lover of men. The meager response from our colleges gives cause for profound concern; had this great prize called for athletes

alone, or for scholars alone, every college could furnish a score of candidates. But for the wise and strong combination some of our states furnish hardly a man, and few have had a creditable number.

But not only is the college man in danger of losing his intellectual ideals; there is a further danger that he lower his own standard of personal efficiency. There is a tendency among a great number of college men to be content with doing merely passable work, to substitute for the college idea of free ambition the childish idea of work under compulsion. The outcome is that, under the name and profession of the principle of freedom, the college is actually administered toward a very large group of men on the principle of compulsion. The students of this group never expect to do a piece of work well; if it is an easy assignment, they put so much the less time upon it; enough to pass is their standard of achievement. A miserable principle for a man to take out into life! Of course, with this lowering of one's standard of achievement often goes the lowering of his sense of honor in the use of means for gaining college standing. A man who is content with slovenly work early in his course finds himself under constantly increasing temptation to dishonesty, as he finds the demands of the college increasing, while his own ability is at a standstill.

One other moral danger of college life must be considered—the tremendous power of collective college sentiment. On the whole, this sentiment is improving; it has ceased to support disorder and immorality; it is in general on the right side of great questions; and yet sometimes it is wofully wrong; it still protects the cowardly cruelty of hazing; it often covers up unmanly dishonesty in inter-collegiate sports; it often sets up false ideals. Now, this compulsive college sentiment comes into outright conflict with the fundamental college principle of freedom. The whole administration of the college aims to secure the personal freedom of the student; the whole tendency of college sentiment is to repress it, to force a man to accept the traditions and standards and aims of the student body. It needs a man of real moral power to make his way wisely and consistently between two principles so conflicting.

And this brings us to the vital fact of our discussion: What training in moral character does the man need in the school that is to send him out into the dangers of college life?

First of all, he needs to acquire the spirit of work. Not simply the habit of work, or the results of it measured by knowledge; he needs far more the spirit of work. He needs to learn the real pleasure and stimulus of intellectual activity. Some of our most famous schools fail lamentably at this point. I have learned to expect that their graduates will come to my classroom thoroughly informed on the elementary facts of their subject, and entirely indifferent to them. They have lost their intellectual ambitions; they want respectable standing, and will work enough to get it; but of real love for study, of ambition for knowledge or appreciation of it, they show no sign. They have been put through years of rigorous drill, but they have received no fine appreciation of the purpose of it all. And a man who comes from the farm or shop, poorly prepared in every detail of knowledge, but eager for the privilege of study, will soon outstrip them. Their school has given them great enthusiasms for football or music or society, but it has failed to do the one essential thing.

Schools of another type send men to college ambitious and earnest, but with no fine standards of scholarly accuracy. Such men fare better in college than the intellectually indifferent, but they too are likely to drop into the ranks of the slovenly students, content with half-knowledge. These men need to learn in school the essential immorality of half doing one's work. The man who has that vice in him is open to all the other vices, and he can never be of much use until it is rooted out. Of all things that I would say to preparatory teachers, this I would say with most insistence: Teach your pupils to do their work well; teach them that anything less than their best is immoral. We cannot overestimate the moral value of the habit of faithful, accurate work. It is worth as much as all your other moral teachings put together. It fits a man for his place in the world; it cuts off half the temptation to fraud and deceit, and it makes a man respect himself. A teacher who is himself doing slovenly work in his classroom had better say nothing to his scholars on moral questions; he is himself an immoral man.

From what I have said of the difficulty of maintaining intellectual ideals in the college you will see how important it is that the school make every attempt to honor scholarship. I realize how difficult a task this is; how little help the colleges are giving, in sending to you,

as they do, a steady stream of delegates who seek out your athletes and give them every honor, while absolutely indifferent to your scholarly students. And yet, difficult as it is, your school must have in it a sentiment that places intellectual attainment second only to character. If those who go from you to college do not go with that sentiment, they are not likely to acquire it in college. The schools are sending to college an increasing number of men who go purely for its opportunities for physical sport, and the notoriety that it promises. Many of them have the most meager preparation by way of knowledge, and none whatever by way of intellectual ambitions. The school has not done its work for such men.

Perhaps the most difficult requirement that the college must pass back upon the schools is the demand for moral vigor. The boy who enters upon the great freedom of college life must be strong enough to meet the temptations that go with free manhood. There is no place where modest and firm adherence to principle is more honored than among college men; but college is not a good place in which to acquire the rudiments of such a character; it is a place for young men, not young boys; and the freshman who is a child morally is in danger. Those schools that train for real manhood, giving increasing freedom and increasing responsibility in the later years of the course, send their students to college with a moral vigor that will make the temptations of college life contribute to strength of character, not to its overthrow.

And, after all our thought of moral dangers and moral training in school and college, we must not forget that neither ethical theory nor moral habit is the determining factor in character; for more powerful than both together is the moral motive—something that takes such hold on the feelings that the will gladly follows where the mind points the way; a great impulse for all that is clean and unselfish and manly. Many such motives work upon individuals. Some men find the compelling moral motive in the sense of obligation to family; some in manly self-respect; not a few in the love of a noble woman; many in the desire to reach some great aim. But as we look back through the centuries and over the lives of the great mass of men, we find but one motive that has remained true and clear and strong for all times and all men. It was not discovered in

the Academy or the Stoa, but in the School of the Fishermen. There is, after all, no training for college or for life that will make character so firm and steady as the seizure of mind and heart by the great compelling Christian motive. Wherever a teacher is communicating this impulse by the power of his own personal life, he is helping to give what character most needs, the great and sufficient motive. Religion may or may not be in the schools—in curriculum or textbooks or spoken words; but genuine religion must be in the teacher, if strong character is to be in his pupils.

I have dwelt in this discussion upon the less hopeful side of life in the modern college, because this was involved necessarily in my subject. Do not understand, from what I have said, that this is a picture of college life as a whole. Remember, side by side with what I have said of the dangers of college life, the great, outweighing tendencies for good; the large body of men in every college who are doing fine scholarly work; the universal sentiment of mutual loyalty and helpfulness; the honor to self-denial and service to the college; the growing religious earnestness of our colleges as a whole. College is a good place for the young man who is ready to enter upon the larger privileges and responsibilities of manhood.